

United States Senate

November 30, 2018

The Honorable Paul R. Lawrence, Ph.D.
Under Secretary for Benefits
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20571

Dear Dr. Lawrence,

I am writing to request information on the impact on Alabama veterans and their families of ongoing problems with the administration of housing benefits during delayed implementation of the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Education Assistance Act (P.L. 115-48), known as the “Forever GI Bill.” I have joined my colleagues in calling for the VA to make whole each and every veteran for missed and incorrect housing payments stemming from technical problems and related computer software issues. However, I have additional questions about the caseload in Alabama and the VA’s plans for working with college administrators to resolve each case in a timely manner and correctly administer these benefits going into the Spring 2019 school semester.

I am gravely concerned about the impact these errors have had on the thousands of Alabama veterans and their family members who rely on the timely and predictable disbursement of GI Bill benefits. Specifically, I am referring to cases like the one I recently heard about a student in my state who lost a parent in combat having to wage her own fight for several months just to have her tuition disbursement corrected. While this student’s case was resolved favorably and her financial good standing restored after several anxiety-filled months, I am told that there may be thousands of other similar cases still pending in Alabama.

While statements made this week by VA officials in Congressional testimony indicate that the VA does intend to reimburse veterans for missed or underpaid housing payments—despite previous statements to the contrary—it remains unclear whether VA will do so at the rates that beneficiaries are legally entitled to beginning August 1, 2018, or if the VA only intends to make veterans whole based on the rates as they existed before the law took effect, thereby remaining in violation of existing law. Any re-payments that are not in compliance with current law would be unacceptable and would send a disturbing message to our military service members, veterans, and their families.

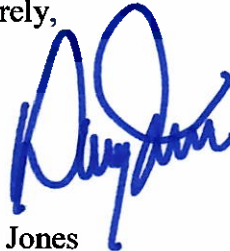
I ask that you please provide me with the following information so that we may work to address remaining issues in Alabama in a timely fashion:

1. How many students are enrolled using GI Bill benefits on Alabama campuses?
2. Can you provide me with a breakdown of the number of GI Bill benefit recipients per Alabama college itemized by college?
3. How many cases of incorrect housing payments on each campus have been logged in Alabama since August 1, 2018?
4. How many of these cases have already been resolved and how many of them have received full compensation for retroactive benefits dating back to August 1?
5. Who is the appropriate contact at each university for students that have questions about how to resolve problems with incorrect disbursements?
6. Do you expect the remaining cases of underpayment to be made whole with retroactive payments before these students begin the Spring 2019 school semester?
7. Do you expect the technical problem to be corrected before the beginning of the Spring 2019 school semester?
8. What additional resources do you need so that the VA may fully comply with the program's guidelines in a timely manner going into the new academic year?

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. I appreciate the work that you do to support our nation's veterans, and especially the survivors of those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Please keep me updated on the progress of the caseload in Alabama. I hope to work with you and the VA to ensure this issue is addressed as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Doug Jones
United States Senator